



Holiday Plants to Lift Your Spirits

By Dr. Matthew Lisy, UConn Adjunct Faculty

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year” according to one of the holiday songs on the radio. For a gardener, however, it can be a bit depressing. The days are at their shortest, it is cold, and it just feels like everything that used to be alive is not. Fortunately there is a cure! The Christmas season can afford us some really nice and colorful plants. Because they are mass produced, the cost of obtaining some to brighten up your home can be minimal.

Poinsettias are certainly the most thought of holiday plant, even though it is native to Mexico and Central America. They can be very delicate, so avoid rough handling, cold drafts, and overwatering. Water only when the surface is dry and the pot feels light. Letting the leaves wilt can result in loss of the lower leaves, and watering too much causes leaf drop and blackened stems, followed by plant death. My favorite part is seeing what unique varieties I can find. Place them in groups for an absolutely stunning display.

The next most common plants are the Christmas cacti. These are actually called forest cacti and are found growing on the trunks of trees in South America. These have an heirloom-like quality to them, and every now and then I hear stories of a family passing a huge version of these down through the generations. Most often people complain that it does not rebloom. They are day-length sensitive plants. If we turn on lights in our home, the plant thinks the sun is still up and will not initiate buds. To get yours to rebloom, find a space in your home that does not receive any artificial light, but rather light from a window. Nature will take care of the rest.

Another favorite of mine is the frosty fern. Despite what its name says, it is not a fern at all. It is a member of the genus *Selaginella*. Commonly called “spikemoss” or “creeping moss,” these names are all misleading as well. Although neither a moss or a fern, they are rather beautiful plants. During the holidays, a green variety with white tips is sold. I recommend keeping them moist at all times, and even leaving some water in the bottom of the container. They are very unforgiving because if they dry out, they are dead.

Another holiday favorite is the amaryllis. Many times they are sold as kits, and consist of a large bulb, potting mix, and a pot. You really get your money’s worth with these as there is a lot of

excitement and anticipation planting it and watching it grow. It usually takes about 6 to 8 weeks before they bloom. The culminating effect is a rather large cluster of flowers that last for a while. These are many times treated like annuals and thrown away after bloom. If cared for properly, it is possible to get them to bloom year after year. Cyclamen are another bulb-type blooming plant that looks incredible for a long time. They like to be moist but not soggy. Although treated like temporary disposable plants, they can be grown for years with some effort.

There are many other types of plants sold under the guise of “holiday plants.” Some of the more interesting are table top mini cypress Christmas trees. There are some neat yellow and green variegated false hollies being offered for sale too. These are really neat eye-catching plants, but like the cypress are not suited to long term growth inside our homes. One of the best year-round available blooming houseplants is the kalanchoe. Most people have hopes of getting it to rebloom, but this rarely happens in the home.

Even though COVID may severely impact our holiday gatherings, there is nothing wrong with dropping one of these colorful plants on a loved one’s doorstep. Grocery stores tend to have displays of these holiday plants right by the entrance. Since we all need to eat, pick up a plant for the table. Your immediate family will appreciate it!

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.



